

Training and Technical
Assistance Centers
Virginia Department of
Education



Linking People and Resources

[Back to Autism Archives](#)

[Close Window](#)

Autism E-News
Volume 4, Issue 1
October 2006

Skill Competencies in Autism: Building Capacity to Serve Virginia's Student's with Autism Spectrum Disorders

By, Carol M. Schall, Ph.D., Director,
Virginia Autism Resource Center
Co-Chair, Virginia Autism Council

In 2004, I was providing a workshop on the characteristics of autism for a small group of professional and paraprofessional educators in a rural Virginia school district about one month before the start of the school year. This group of about 8 special education teachers and 2 special education aides were attentive and polite until I asked for questions. One teacher, Claire, moved uncomfortably for a moment or two, and then raised her hand. She said, "I am getting a child with autism in my class next year and I am truly scared! I learned how to teach children with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and mental retardation and I feel prepared to meet the needs of children with those disorders, but this particular kid with autism is hard. None of the strategies that I learned seemed to work for him in his classroom last year. I don't know what to do and I am scared to death!"

Claire's reaction was surprising to me. After all, the prevalence of students with autism in public school programs has been increasing in Virginia since the early 1990's and surely she must have taught a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) before. In fact, she admitted as much. Specifically she taught a child who she referred to as having 'high functioning autism.' Yet, Claire also reported that, even with his mild symptoms, that child was difficult to teach. The young man who was entering her program in September had more severe and problematic symptoms. Specifically, he did not follow verbal directions and was prone to severe temper tantrums at school. In short, Claire did not know how to teach a child to sit in a chair and learn to learn.

In fact, the major challenge many teachers face when serving children with ASD is teaching them to learn. Most teachers are prepared to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of learners with learning disabilities or mental retardation. Teachers are even required to demonstrate skills in developing structured behavior plans for learners with behavioral or emotional disturbances. Few teachers receive specific instruction on how to teach individuals with ASD to attend to instruction, follow verbal directions, and cope with the ever changing and confusing world that exists in most public school classrooms.

In fact, as the Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Centers survey teachers each year to identify teacher training and technical assistance needs, teachers consistently identify the need for more training in autism as one of their top training needs. As the prevalence of autism has risen over the past decade, every public school in Virginia has been affected by students with ASD. Individuals with ASD represent the entire spectrum of human abilities, from those with significant intellectual disabilities to those with extraordinary giftedness, to those with every intellectual ability in between. Likewise, individuals with ASD are in every type of classroom in our school system from gifted classrooms, to full inclusion without support, to self-contained programs that address student's functional literacy needs. Consequently, every special education, and most general education teachers in Virginia will, at some time, be responsible for teaching a learner with ASD.

Thus, two issues indicate a glaring need in our school system. First, the majority of teachers in our public school classrooms have received scant, if any, instruction on how to teach learners with ASD. Second, *every* special education teacher will have to teach a learner with ASD at some point in their career. Individuals with ASD demonstrate a particularly complex set of behaviors that sometimes leads to the need for a higher ratio of adults to students. Thus, there are frequently more paraprofessional staff supporting individuals with ASD. Finally, many general education teachers will have students with ASD in their classes. Consequently, there is a tremendous need for teacher training on the characteristics, learning needs, and teaching strategies that will support learners with ASD.

It is in this context that the Virginia Autism Council developed the *Skill Competencies for Professionals and Paraprofessionals in Virginia Supporting Individuals with Autism across the Lifespan*. [NOTE] (Virginia Autism Council, 2005). This important document is a road map for professional and paraprofessional educators who desire to increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities when teaching learners with ASD. The *Skill Competencies* were developed by a group of Virginia educators, community services personnel, and consultants from many different services sectors and perspectives. For example, this group included professionals from public and private educational settings, adult community services, public and private consultants, and state agencies.

Once developed in draft form, these *Skill Competencies* were reviewed by a select group of national and statewide experts who reviewed the sections for content validity and made recommendations for revisions. Simultaneously, they were reviewed by consultant groups of stakeholders across Virginia to again make recommendations for revision and verify that this set of competencies would result in professionals and paraprofessionals who knew about and could support individuals with ASD across the state. All of the recommendations from both the expert and the stakeholder groups were then considered by the development committee who revised the *Skill Competencies* a final time.

The resulting document represents a list of knowledge and skills that professionals and paraprofessionals who support individuals with ASD should have to ensure optimal skill. It is comprised of six different skill area including:

1. General Autism: addresses basic information regarding what the diagnosis of ASD means.
2. Individualization and Support Strategies: addresses planning for appropriate assessment and program planning for individuals with an ASD.
3. Communication: focuses on one of the primary diagnostic areas of need for ASD.
4. Social Skills: focuses on one of the primary diagnostic areas of need for ASD.
5. Behavior: focuses on determining messages communicated by behaviors and developing positive plans to teach new skills.
6. Sensory Motor Development: addresses the need for some individuals with an ASD to have sensory motor supports.

Within each of the skill areas are knowledge competencies that represent basic knowledge areas, and skill competencies that are the basic skills that paraprofessionals and professionals should demonstrate when supporting an individual with ASD. Table 1 shows each competency area with a list of the 2 to 3 knowledge competencies for each area. (See Table 1)

Under each knowledge area are several skill competencies that represent the specific skills in which professional and paraprofessionals in Virginia should have competency. Table 2 shows the types of skills that are included in this document. This is the very first section of the document for General Autism Competencies and includes both the knowledge and skill competencies. (See Table 2)

Finally, the committee who developed these *Skill Competencies* acknowledged the different roles for varying levels of professionals across services in Virginia. Thus each knowledge and skill competency is not intended to be mastered by every professional and paraprofessional in Virginia. Instead, there is a grid with check marks for four different professional categories. The first category, paraprofessional direct staff, refers to anyone directly supports students with ASD in a non-professional capacity. The second staff category is titled Professional Direct Staff and refers to teachers, therapists and other professional staff who are within their first-to-third year of practice, or are beyond those years of practice, but have not had training or experience supporting individuals with ASD using scientifically based practices. The third category, Master Professional Direct Staff, refers to direct service professionals who have worked within their domain and with people with ASD for more than three years. The final category of staff that the competencies are designed to guide is titled Advanced Degree, Program Developers or Specialists. This category of staff refers to those individuals who have pursued additional certification or degrees (for example Sensory Integration Certification, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, etc.) and /or those who have extensive experience and training pertinent to supporting people with ASD (Virginia Autism Council, 2005, pp. 3-4).

As a result of this document, Educators who desire greater training in understanding, teaching, and supporting learners with ASD have a set of skills that, once mastered, will result in excellence in education. School systems who desire to increase their capacity to support learners with ASD can use this document to guide their professional development efforts for their paraprofessional and professional staff. Finally, universities across Virginia have begun to use this document to develop graduate level coursework to support preservice and inservice professionals who want to increase their preparation to teach students with ASD.

In short, the *Skill Competencies* are a part of a system wide effort to increase the capacity of all of Virginia's Schools to meet the needs of individuals with ASD in all areas of the system. At a micro level, though, this document works for teachers individually. It provides a road map for Claire to get more training, so that the next time a student with autism comes into her classroom, she can say, "I have the knowledge and skills to teach any child, even a child with ASD, who needs me!"

NOTE: This document will, herein, be referred to as the *Skill Competencies*

References

The Virginia Autism Council, (2005). Skill Competencies for Professionals and Paraprofessionals in Virginia Supporting Individuals with Autism across the Lifespan. Author: Richmond, VA. Available at <http://www.autismtrainingva.org>.

Regions 1 & 8 T/TAC at VCU

Sue Palko palkosm@vcu.edu

Linda Oggel lsoggel@vcu.edu

Regions 2 & 3 T/TAC at ODU

Jennifer Mitchell jmitchell@ttac.odu.edu

Kelly Koons kkoons@odu.edu

Region 4 T/TAC at GMU

Karen Berlin kberlin@gmu.edu

Kris Ganley kganley@gmu.edu

Region 5 T/TAC at JMU

Sally Chappel chappesl@jmu.edu

Teresa Cogar cogartl@jmu.edu

Regions 6 & 7 T/TAC at VT

Teresa Lyons lyonst@vt.edu

Diann Eaton dweaton@vt.edu

Know an educator who might enjoy receiving this quarterly newsletter? Just send them to
<http://www.ttac.odu.edu/esubs/forms/autism.htm>